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ABSTRACT

One of the most difficult problems facing colleges today is dealing with students whose basic skills are too low to allow them to benefit from college-level studies. While some institutions seem to have given up expectations for underprepared students' achievement, others have instituted massive programs of individualized counseling and tutoring as a supplement to remedial coursework. Evidence suggests that these compensatory programs are effective in increasing reading levels and lowering dropout rates; however, these programs also introduce a number of problems and questions of program design, costs, teacher morale, and selective admissions. Several options are available to colleges to reconcile the conflict between maintaining academic standards and open admissions. Most practical and desirable may be to allow any student to enroll in any course, but to limit the number of courses a poorly prepared student may take and mandate the use of support services. Poor writing ability may be improved by an approach called "writing across the curriculum." Based on the premise that writing can and should have an integral role in any course, the approach utilizes techniques including journals and notebooks, which can be extremely versatile teaching tools in many disciplines, and brief, in-class writing periods, which can stimulate discussion, clarify issues, and reinforce learning experiences. (Brief descriptions of remedial, English as a Second Language, and study skills programs at six multi-campus urban community college districts are included.) (AYC)

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THE LITERACY CRISIS

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BULLETIN

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The Literacy Crisis

It is no secret that today's high school graduates are reading at levels seriously below those of two decades ago. The decline in literacy over the past fifteen years has been well documented. Countless research studies have shown that colleges nationwide are enrolling freshmen who are academically unprepared to handle freshman-level course work. Even selective institutions that accept only the cream of the crop are finding large percentages of students who cannot read, write or think well enough to succeed in traditional first year college courses. Only the top twelve percent of all high school graduates in California are eligible to enroll at UCLA, yet approximately half of the incoming freshmen currently fail the English proficiency exam.

Some people have suggested that the demands for literacy have changed with the times and that traditional forms of literacy are no longer needed in this age of electronic media. CSCC staff members, however, believe that the importance of being able to express oneself in writing cannot be overemphasized, television notwithstanding. Writing is not a skill that should be limited to English classrooms. If an auto mechanic cannot write his diagnosis of what needs to be fixed on a car, how effective will he be on the job? If a brilliant chemist cannot write a report on his/her research findings, what good will his/her discoveries do for the world? The best estimates suggest that more than fifty million adults in the United States are not literate in English—that is, their difficulties with reading and writing hinder them in their efforts to find and hold productive jobs.

All of this points up the fact that the literacy crisis cannot be ignored. It is now evident not only to the educational community but to private industry leaders and the general public as well. Accusing fingers have been pointed at teachers, public school administrators, school boards, parents, legislators, judges, network television executives, and even the Federal government. Some well-meaning educators even go so far as to suggest that community colleges and universities may be perpetuating illiteracy by not requiring students to read and write in all areas of curriculum. Literacy, they contend, like many other skills, requires continuous practice to be learned successfully.

Dealing With the Decline in Literacy

More than any other form of post-secondary education in the twentieth century, the community colleges have borne the brunt of the academically under-prepared student. What should be done with students whose basic skills are too low to allow them to benefit from college-level studies? This is by far the most difficult problem facing colleges today, and they are grappling with it in various ways.

Some institutions seem to have given up the expectation for student achievement and the hope of guiding these students into degree or transfer programs. Instead they award certificates and diplomas for many combinations of courses, creating the illusion that the student has had a successful college career.

Other colleges have instituted massive programs of individualized attention in the form of counseling and tutoring as a supplement to remedial coursework in the three R's. Much attention has also been devoted to monitoring the attendance and progress of these students, leading them through special programs in learning laboratories and other self-paced media, one-on-one tutoring, and study skills training.

The preponderance of evidence indicates that these compensatory programs are effective. Even though the data on such programs are not always reliable, most of the studies reported in the published literature show that special attention yields special results. These programs do bring up reading levels and lower student dropout rates.

Remedial Programs Create New Problems

In solving some problems, however, compensatory programs have created others. Should underprepared students be segregated in special remedial programs or allowed to enroll in regular classes? If they are to be separated from the regular courses, how can these programs respond to charges of

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racism and cultural bias? On the other hand, if these students are not to be singled out, how can instructors be expected to teach effectively a group of students with a wide range of ability in one classroom? Another question being asked more loudly today is, how many times can the public be expected to pay the schools to teach the basic skills to the same students? Still other problems plague college staff. How can the credibility of the community college as an institution of higher education be maintained in the face of the large amount of time and resources devoted to compensatory education? How can the morale of the faculty be maintained when instructors who are qualified and prepared to teach college-level academic courses now find themselves teaching basic skills at high school levels and below?

Literacy In the Transfer Programs

The question of selective admission brings up another thorny problem: that of literacy in the transfer programs. Should students be denied admission to certain academic programs? The open door policy of the colleges and the fact that students can be taught to succeed suggest that they should not be denied the programs of their choice. If community colleges offer unprepared students access only to remedial programs featuring the same basic education that failed these students in lower grades, the students are being denied access to the humanistic and scientific thought on which transfer programs are based. The colleges must teach literacy in the transfer programs and they must provide whatever assistance it takes to get the student through them.

However, guiding students through these programs without regard to academic ability is expensive. No form of education is more costly than the close monitoring required by slow learners. Since the funds for this kind of commitment are not likely to be available, some compromises will be necessary, but the compromises must not be in the form of segregated compensatory programs. Sending poor students away by failing them or allowing them to drop out is another unacceptable course of action. The number of illiterate students is too large and the competition too great to allow such an easy out.

Integrating Remediation with Mainstream Curriculum

Several acceptable options are available to the colleges to reconcile the conflict between maintaining standards and allowing all students to enter the programs of their choice. The one that seems most practical and desirable is to allow any student to enroll in any course but to limit the number of courses a poorly prepared student may take in any given term and to mandate the use of available support services for those students. Mainstreaming poorly prepared students can be done effectively by coordinating remediation into the regular college coursework. One successful example of this concept is the Developmental Studies Program at Penn Valley Community College, where their Learning Skills Laboratory is viewed as an extension of the English and math classrooms. Students complete required lab activities before progressing in their courses or concurrently with them, as mandated by faculty. Those colleges that closely monitor student progress and guide students through auxiliary instruction are well on their way toward the sizeable effort required to teach the poorly prepared student.

News From The Districts

Dallas Has Writing Across the Curriculum

Lamenting the poor state of student writing, El Centro's staff members formed an interdisciplinary Writing Committee composed of faculty and administrators from all departments, including technical and occupational areas. An all-day program on practical uses of writing in non-writing classes was held to introduce writing as a college-wide priority.

On that basis, the Writing Committee applied to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Consultancy Grant. NEH awarded the grant and also provided a consultant who has conducted six workshops and influenced many instructors to use writing for broader purposes and in more effective ways. These include teaching writing as a process rather than as a product, using non-graded writing, peer collaboration, formulating assignments to get better writing, and responding to student writing in ways that will elicit better writing.

Discussions about writing throughout the college have resulted in instructional and institutional changes. A specific writing goal has been included in the stated college goals. Many instructors have included writing objectives in their instructional goals and are experimenting with writing techniques. The instructors of freshman composition courses have established exit competencies for English 101. And importantly, the writing emphasis and the workshops have provided a focus and a mutual concern that has integrated faculty from diverse academic and technical fields.

Miami-Dade Surveys Developmental Students

The problem of students' inadequate academic skills has been exacerbated by the great number of students who come to college with a native language other than English. In a survey of its developmental students, Miami-Dade Community College found that the majority recognizes their deficiencies in the basic skills. These students did not develop good study habits in high school and now wish they had taken more academic courses to improve their communication and computational skills.

In January 1982, the Dade County Board of Public Instruction and the Miami-Dade Board of Trustees held a joint meeting in which the two systems agreed to coordinate their efforts to raise the basic skills levels of their students. Subsequently, both the secondary schools and Miami-Dade have requested participation in the College Board's Project EQ. Initial planning meetings have been held to involve teachers and faculty in increased planning for all major curriculum areas. The Goal of Project EQ is to implement curricula based on competencies that have been identified as exit competencies for high school and entrance competencies for college.

Additionally, a team composed of Dade County English teachers and Miami-Dade Community College English faculty attended a writing conference at the University of Michigan in the summer of 1981, and work is now in progress toward developing "Writing Across the Curriculum" programs for the District.

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Writing Across The Curriculum

There is no panacea for the writing crisis in the colleges that becomes more serious each year. It is evident to most instructors that spelling and grammar quizzes are not going to solve the problem, which actually has more to do with cognitive ability than with mechanical detail.

Teachers outside the English field sometimes feel uneasy about evaluating student writing. Many remember unhappy experiences with pedantic English teachers, and some think that encouraging writing is the exclusive territory of the English department. But the fact is that there is a wealth of knowledge about writing among teachers in almost every field. After all, who knows better than chemistry teachers how their lab reports should read? Who knows better than the geographer whether first person narration is acceptable in professional geography publications? Most teachers have a good grasp on writing appropriate to good work in their respective fields. Regardless of whether they can diagram a sentence or remember the rules of grammar, most teachers can convey the style and form of written information in their professional disciplines. Teachers are already practicing professional writers in their field. Once they recognize this, they can more easily guide students toward acquiring these skills in their classes.

An interdisciplinary group of faculty at the University of Michigan, formed to address the student writing crisis, recognized that the standard practice of assigning the writing requirement to the English Department was insufficient to solve the problem. They saw that the collegiate requirement should be a collegiate responsibility. One of the results of this group's work was an effort to stress writing in all subject areas within the context of the regular coursework. Notable success has been shown at the University of Michigan with this technique.

Writing in the Classroom

As a tool for learning, the writing process itself is probably more important than its product because the process of writing exercises and influences the thinking process. The benefits are numerous. The act of writing opinions, questions, or reactions to subject matter causes students to personalize the course content. Regular writing makes it difficult for passive students to remain passive. The act of writing, even for a few minutes, generates ideas, observations, and emotions. The product, the term paper or essay exam, is useful in providing a way to evaluate student performance, but it has been suggested that too much emphasis is being placed on product-oriented writing and this may be negatively affecting the writing ability of students.

Keeping a journal or notebook can be a useful tool to enhance learning in a variety of disciplines. The humanities faculty at Michigan Technological University coordinates an off campus workshop program to encourage teachers from every discipline to incorporate journal writing into regular classroom activity. As a result of the workshop program, teachers in all fields are using writing as a learning tool in their classes. An American history professor periodically interrupts his lectures to have students write for five minutes on their experiences related to a particular lecture point. This brief writing time effectively engages students more personally with the lecture topic. A geography professor asks students to keep notebooks to stimulate their powers of observation. He finds that having to write down what they see, students look more carefully and begin to acquire the basic techniques of scientific observation. A political science professor requires students to record frequently their opinions about current events. He also asks them to write short personal summaries of articles, thereby creating a record of what they've read during the term. A music teacher asks her students to record their daily experiences listening to music, then uses the subjective content of these logs for class discussion.

Instructors in technical disciplines are also using writing as an aid to learning. A metallurgy professor requires students to write about the day's lecture topic prior to attending class, and to write a summary or questions about the lecture after class. These writing periods encourage thoughtful reflection on important topics, give student practice in writing answers to possible exam questions and improve students' writing fluency. In this class, the journals are checked to monitor student progress but are not graded.

A Tool for Learning

Teachers generally find it easy to add writing to their classes by using journals because they are an extremely versatile teaching tool. It does not take more teacher time, regardless of class size, and the writing can be spot-checked, skimmed or read carefully, depending on the instructor's time and purpose. Journals serve as many functions as the ways they can be used. Five minute writing periods in class can stimulate discussion, clarify hazy issues, start small group activity, reinforce learning experience, and provoke student imagination. Asking students to free-associate while writing as fast as they can for 5 minutes without stopping gets the mental gears moving and is good for brainstorming new research projects or paper topics. It is also a good way to get students over the fear of the blank page. Topics can be anything from personal experiences or

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Writing Across The Curriculum

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opinions, to summarizing lecture and reading material. Additionally, brief writing interludes in lectures allow the instructor time to monitor and evaluate the mood, progress and problems of the class and to make revisions and adjustments in the course material where necessary.

Students should be encouraged to write frequently and take some risks, experimenting with form and style. Student anxiety about writing can be eased by the suggestion that the journal is a place to try new things without the worry of judgment and end product. What matters is the process more than the success or failure of the attempt. The journal can be a vehicle for exploring the student's own values and belief systems. Students who make regular and serious use of their journals will certainly witness their own growth.

Writing can and should have an integral role in any course, not so much to improve communications skills as to enhance learning of course material. It is an invaluable tool for learning to use the patterns of inquiry of a particular discipline, formulation of ideas, and most of all, assimilation of course content. It is a way of learning.

News From The Districts

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Maricopa Sets Priorities

The District's Joint Council on Educational Priorities, has been charged with the responsibility of developing a set of clearly defined priorities. One of the major priorities that emerged in 1978 was the mandate to address the needs of students with diverse levels of academic preparation.

Glendale Community College has been a leader in this District's developmental educational efforts. Its programs include English as a Second Language through two different instructional apporaches: one for the student who has had little formal education and another for students who have had secondary and post-secondary schooling in their native language. The Adult Basic Skills program consists of reading and writing skills training as well as a counseling component, which helps students to develop an awareness of their resources for effective decision making. Glendale also offers a full complement of sub-100 level courses in reading, English, and mathematics, featuring a coordinated assessment and advisement process designed to insure effective student program placement

Recognizing that basic skill competencies are the undergirding of literacy and general education, Glendale Community College will be involved in the identification of the basic entry and exit competencies required for general education and occupational programs.

St. Louis Teaches Study Techniques

In an unusual effort to integrate remediation into the content of non-remedial courses, for the past several years a reading instructor on the Florissant Valley campus has offered his expertise to interested faculty members in other fields. The instructor will observe a given class and at the following session will share his notes with the class. This enables students to see how they may take notes more efficiently. Attention is also given to the text and the kind of study techniques that are most appropriate for that particular course. Faculty from all divisions of the college have utilized this assistance, and frequently request it again in succeeding semesters.

On the Forest Park campus, one of the teachers of the team-taught Humanities course leads group study sessions outside of regular class time. These sessions focus on note-taking, outlining and test-taking. The students generally meet in smaller groups than the scheduled class meetings, and are able to receive individual attention. In a more traditional framework, the Forest Park Writing Lab has instructors available to assist students who may have writing questions in any course. The Social Science Department has made particular use of this assistance with regard to research paper techniques.

Los Angeles Expands ESL

Los Angeles City College has the largest number of limited and non-English speaking students in the nation. Sixty-one percent of the 1981 freshman class came from homes where English was not the principal language; and more than fifty languages are spoken at one neighborhood high school which sends students to this inner city community college. A total of 67 sections of English, developmental education and speech classes in ESL have been scheduled for the Fall 1982 semester.

Because the ESL program was no longer meeting the diverse needs of the Los Angeles Community Colleges, in 1980-81 the English Council, representing all district English departments, began planning an expanded program for ESL. Three five-unit core classes were established, with supplementary classes added in conversation, vocabulary, and advanced reading. At several of the colleges heavy emphasis for all ESL students is placed on using writing laboratories. All of the colleges also offer ESL speech classes, and several offer developmental education classes in ESL.

Chicago's Developmental Program Boosts Retention

City Colleges of Chicago runs a two-tier developmental education program in which entry is based on reading and writing assessment. The first tier consists of a twelve hour block of courses for students reading and writing below the seventh grade level. A six hour reading/writing communications core is completed from among other developmental courses in mathematics and speech and also can include specific discipline courses in social sciences, humanities, physical education, business and child development. Mandatory counseling and tutoring complete the students' commitment to the program.

The second tier of the program is for students reading and writing between the 7th and 11th grades. Again, a six hour reading/writing communications core is augmented by completing courses in human development, social science, math, business, and humanities. In addition to intensive counseling and tutoring, the students are carefully tracked in their academic progress by specially selected faculty and support staff.

Retention and achievement levels in both tiers of the block are from 20 to 40 percent higher than in non-blocked courses for similar groups of students.

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges SEP 24 1982